

Mortuary Operations during the Kuwaiti C-130 Mishap on 10 Dec 99

A Mortuary Officer's Perspective

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It's the wee hours of the morning at the deployed site in Kuwait when the knock on the tent door leads to the words "there's been a plane crash, sir—you're needed at the Command Post". In the darkness, the flashlight lit figure bearing the news is barely discernible, but the message becomes crystal clear instantly—this is a mortuary case.

Scrambling to get ready for the long walk to the CP, and the even rougher path ahead, the realization hits that there's no longer any time for training or preparation. All that matters now is what has been taught and learned already. All those field training exercises and classes on field mortuary come flooding back. Along with it comes regret for not reading a little deeper into the AFI's or paying a little more attention in class, or even doing one more check on the deployed mortuary kit. This has to be right the first time!

As with nearly all mortuary cases involving aircraft mishaps, a great deal of uncertainty and confusion surrounded the developing facts: A C-130 rotator flight had crashed somewhere, either Al Jaber Air Base or Kuwait City International Airport, carrying a full load of troops either arriving or departing the AOR, and at least one person was killed, with many more injured.

The question immediately loomed—was this a Search and Recovery effort? The answer provided some relief to the mounting tension—no, the aircraft was intact and victims removed to area hospitals. But which ones, and where? The mortuary officer wheels began spinning as bits of information began trickling in and the mortuary processing team readied for the task ahead. Two weeks in country, and a major accident response mortuary case – now three known dead at local hospitals. Decision time: Process remains at the hospital morgue downtown, or bring the remains back to the field mortuary.

The Ali Al Salem Services mortuary team mobilized and requested mortuary assistance from Al Jaber. The field mortuary kit was taken to the downtown hospital, more than an hour away. The two bases joined forces to form a remains processing team at the hospital morgue. The pay-off of common training proved itself here, as the team was comprised not only of Active Duty troops from two deployed sites, but also included Air National Guard troops supporting these sites from half a dozen Stateside bases.

With seamless integration, the team began the arduous task of finding the believed-to-be identifications, and preparing the identification paperwork. This task was complicated due to the fact this was an inbound rotator, so all the people the victims worked with were back at home base, and they had not yet even inprocessed at the deployed site, so no one knew them there either. Processing needed to begin on the remains, so identification would be more difficult.

One victim appeared to have been flight crew, but the others were still not yet identified, so field processing included both footprints and fingerprints for all three remains. The medical personnel on scene as well as the Kuwaiti hospital staff had been very efficient at immediately removing all personal effects. These items were safeguarded by the medical folks, but had to be recovered from Al Jaber where the medics were stationed

The challenge became finding who had what, and establishing the chain of custody for each item. Fortunately, visual identification based on recovered ID cards was possible. The "obvious" option to attempt to re-associate personal effects with the remains had been trained out of the team, but still was a temptation to avoid. Through a team effort, all three remains were printed, tentatively identified with "Believed To Be" information and prepared for transfer to the Landstuhl Mortuary. (more on next page)

In the meantime, intensive coordination was occurring back at the deployed sites, as transportation requests, forms and messages were prepared and coordinated with PERSCO and base leadership. Once again, the training courses that said you can't ever get too much coordination and communication proved correct. For hours, a near constant stream of communication with command posts, doctors, commanders, mortuaries, Embassy officers, transportation system workers and Services workers all combined to make the process successful.

The Ali Al Salem team prepared the transfer cases and escorted the remains back to the base awaiting transportation and the next flight to Landstuhl, Germany. Within 24 hrs of the start of mortuary processing, an escort team was hand-carrying the remains aboard the aircraft bound for Germany. A long process that involved coordination with many agencies in various countries and bases was finished, at least from the field processing perspective.

Some lessons were learned along the way.

- A mortuary team in the AOR needs to be mobile, with the ability to take the mortuary to the morgue. Many AOR deaths involve auto accidents with the remains taken to downtown hospitals, just as the victims from this aircraft mishap were immediately taken to local hospitals.
- The medical forms are not always available to the local doctors; have a copy of the DD 2064 Death Certificate ready for them in the mortuary kit, especially at civilian hospitals in Kuwait.
- The BTB identification may not always be possible using DD 565 Statements of Recognition of Deceased from associates or friends, due to lack of personnel who know new arrivals
- Earliest flight out may mean processing teams work 24 hours straight; perhaps OK to rest, then continue transfer after recovery before driving to airport (for safety reasons – don't make more work for mortuary officer by causing a fatigue-related accident).
- Plan for escorts to go with remains regardless of what the AFI says—it's going to happen, so write the checklists to account for these briefings.
- Be ready, be trained, and when the mortuary case begins with that knock on the door at 3 am, the training will pay off in properly processed and timely returned remains, with dignity and respect.